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ABSTRACT

A brief discussion of important issues in prekindergarten screening and programming precedes annotated citations of 19 references. A consideration of characteristics of a high quality preschool program is followed by discussion of the importance of the preschool teacher and early childhood screening and assessment. It is argued that a successful program for preschoolers depends on the perceptive skills and ability of the preschool teacher to be attuned and responsive to each child's developmental readiness for being lured into learning. Knowledge of child development is essential for teacher competency. Observation skills and notes on significant episodes that reflect children's progress in: language skills, social interactions, self-control, attention span, and persistence at difficult tasks are important assessment tools for teachers. The Denver Developmental Screening Test can be helpful. Teachers should have a good acquaintance with ways to carry out time and event sampling, write up case study vignettes, and use Socratic questioning techniques in order to increase children's reflective and reasoning skills. (RH)

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Prekindergarten Screening and Programming: Important Issues[1]

Because the academic prognosis for children from high-risk families where responsive, nurturant interactions may be in short supply and where teaching and reading to children may be skills that overwhelmed parents neither feel knowledgeable about nor comfortable about carrying out, there is particular urgence in planning for high quality preschool experiences for young children at risk for academic failure.

What characterizes a quality preschool program? Theoretical underpinnings by Piaget, Erikson, language development theorists as well as researches from British Infant School classrooms and intervention/demonstration projects in the USA have clarified what the optimal caregiving environment looks like for young children. Individualized nurturance, careful planning for classroom group experiences, attention to social emotional skills as well as intellective skills, daily reading, provision of a variety of materials and opportunities for exploration, construction, and experimentation with fluid and solid materials, have been shown to correlate with greater cognitive gains and more classroom success on school entry. Program content and materials may not be as important as how caregivers and teachers relate to individual youngsters. Responsive attunement that carefully matches teaching and care to the needs and skills and understanding of the preschooler have been shown to be most

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effective in helping a young child progress well in preschool competencies. Such competencies embrace learning to cooperate with peers, to carry out rich dramatic role play with peers, and in the cognitive domain, learning to classify, seriate, and carry out mini-experiments to find out what will happen in measuring, sorting, sinking, balancing objects, mixing colors, etc.

Importance of the Preschool Teacher

Certainly safety, health, and nutrition are essential for an optimal preschool program. Certainly, carefully thought out goals for children and carefully sequenced lesson plans are helpful. But the bedrock of a successful program for preschoolers depends on the perceptive skills and ability of the preschool teacher to be attuned and responsive to each child's developmental readiness for being lured into learning. The excellent teacher plans a serene and interesting environment to intrigue and lure but not overwhelm a preschooler. The preschool teacher who feels comfortable in facing child anger, and assisting rejected or isolate or bullying children toward more effective and positive social interactions, has been shown to create the best climate for child developmental gains - social as well as cognitive advances.

Child development knowledge is essential for such teacher competency. The ideal teacher is skilled in arrangement of environments for learning, time-pacing, techniques for positive discipline, attention to non-sexist treatment of children,

positive partnerships with parents, reflective listening skills for child hurts, resentments and sorrows, and ability to create a happy, orderly climate in which children feel safe emotionally to explore and learn and struggle to learn new concepts and ways of interacting. The optimal teacher also is sensitive to needs for continuity in education, and works with kindergarten teachers to plan for transitions and continuity in provision of child centered classrooms.

Screening and Assessment

Observation skills and notes on significant episodes that reflect progress in language skills, in social interactions, in self-control, in attention span and persistence at difficult tasks are important assessment tools for teachers. The Denver Developmental Screening Test can be helpful. Teachers should have a good acquaintance with how to carry out time sampling and event sampling, how to write up case study vignettes, and how to use Socratic Questioning techniques (a la Blank's work "Teaching learning in the Preschool) in order to increase reflective and reasoning skills.

Whether an individual child knows every color or can count to five may not be as important for later school success as child self esteem and motivation for learning, ability to relate well to teaching adults, and curiosity to find out about the world through sequences of experimentation with materials. Research has made clear the multifaceted and subtle nature of interactions between children, teachers, classroom materials, and peers that facilitate or mitigate against early school success.

Annotated References

Berrueta-Clement, J. R., Schweinhart, L. J., Barnett, W. S., Epstein, A. S., & Weikart, D. P. (1984). Changed lives: The effects of the Perry Preschool Program on youths through age 19. Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 8. Ypsitanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

The economic benefit for disadvantaged youth who, as preschoolers from low-income, low-education families attended an early enrichment program is clearly shown. The number of months with a job, the number of years of education, the lessened dependence on Welfare, the lessened risk of delinquency-all contribute to economic as well as human savings for society and the youngsters themselves.

Bretherton, I., O'Connell, B., Shore, C., & Bates, E. (1984). The effect of contextual variation on symbolic play development from 20 to 28 months. In I. Bretherton (Ed.), Symbolic play: The development of social understanding.

In both a laboratory setting and in home visits, the range of children's symbolic play was enhanced when adults modelled play behaviors. Children were more able to carry out self reference pretend play (pretend to feed themselves), other reference (pretend to feed a doll as if it is a real baby), and agent-patient pretend play (children pretend to play both roles of a play interaction with two doll or animal figures). These

researchers stress the importance of providing adult modelling and provision of toys which show variations on realistic or less realistic resemblance to real objects. They conclude that it is very important to discover "the range of a child's ability to play under different contextual conditions."

Friedrich, L. K. & Stein, A. H. (1973). Aggressive and prosocial television programs and the natural behavior of preschool children. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 38 (4, Serial No. 151).

Preschoolers who were observed in peer play on the playground received daily doses of either an aggressive film, a neutral film or a prosocial television program (Mr. Rogers Neighborhood) daily for a month of preschool. Afterward, they were again observed in playground interactions for two weeks. The children who had had daily exposure to prosocial television segments showed more patience with peers and more ability to delay gratification. Prosocial programming should be an essential part of preschool curriculum.

Haskins, R. (1985). Public school aggression among children with varying day-care experience. Child Development, 48, 806-819.

Kindergarten children from low-income, low-education families who had attended a high-quality preschool program were observed to act 15 times as aggressive on the playground with

peers, in the corridors, lunchrooms and classrooms as control peers who had not attended program. The program had been exclusively cognitively oriented. When the American Guidance Service program "My friends and me" was implemented to teach prosocial skills in the next waves of preschoolers who came through the Abcedarian Project, then, later, those children did not exhibit higher levels of peer aggression on entry into elementary school. Teachers need to plan for prosocial program goals and how to achieve them as carefully as they plan for cognitive/linguistic and motoric skill goals in preschool.

Honig, A. S. (1989, Winter). Longitudinal effects of quality preschool programs: Review of research. Day Care and Early Education, 35-38.

A review of longitudinal outcomes for disadvantaged preschoolers is presented. Outcome data vary, but depending on the project, suggest that lowered rates of repeated grades and of attendance in special education, lower rates of academic failure (especially for girls), better health, and more years of education are among the outcomes for teenagers who had attended University-based, high-quality preschool programs as preschoolers.

Honig, A. S., Lally, & Mathieson, D. H. (1982). Personal and social adjustment of school children after five years in the Family Development Research Program. Child Care Quarterly,

11, (2), 138-146.

After five years in a University-based, high quality preschool program that provided an open education model, with free child choice of activity settings (fine motor, gross motor, sensory and creative experiences) and an active parent involvement component, the graduates showed high positive social interactions with kindergarten teachers, and peers, as well as positive attitudes toward learning. However, these effects dissipated after entry to first grade, where a teacher-dominated classroom was the rule, rather than the activity-oriented program with much teacher responsiveness to child initiatives that the children had known in the preschool program. The program graduates were both more positive and more aggressive with teachers, but were more positive with peers than controls. This research points up the troubling perspective that ECE (Early Childhood Education) models may not be congruent with traditional classroom models in elementary school. More attention needs to be paid to appropriate transition activities, whereby ECE teachers would emphasize child directed learning and personalized responsive attention to at-risk children who have initially attended developmental preschool programs.

Honig, A. S. & McCarron, P. A. (1990). Prosocial behaviors of handicapped and typical peers in an integrated preschool. In A. S. Honig (Ed.), Optimizing early child care and education. London, England: Gordon & Breach Science

Publishers.

In an integrated preschool typical and handicapped preschoolers showed no discrimination toward children of their own or other group in responding in prosocial ways, such as cooperating and helping. However, the frequency of prosocial overtures was much rarer among the atypical preschoolers. Simply putting typical and atypical peers together in enriching preschool classroom situations may not be sufficient. Specific teaching of, modelling of, and positive shaping of prosocial interactions may well be necessary to boost such skills among atypical preschoolers. More prosocial interactions took place in teacher-guided, in-classroom free play than in gym period free play. Smaller environments, with encouraging teachers, may facilitate more prosocial interactions.

Hubbell, R., Plantz, M., Condelli, L. & Barrett, B. (1987). The transition of Head Start children into public school. Final Report. Volume 1. Alexandria, VA: CSR, Inc.

The Head Start Synthesis Project showed children achieving good cognitive and socioemotional gains in Head Start compared with control youngsters. But these gains usually declined once the children entered elementary school and then dissipated by third grade. Research from the Head Start 1986 Transition Project showed that teachers in these programs were more likely to plan for preschooler transition to school. The more frequent the teacher participation in such planning through provision of

transition activities, the higher they rated the preparedness of the children, and the lower the child stress reported by parents during the child's first month of kindergarten. The children continued to show more resilience than controls over the first school months. Preschool teachers of disadvantaged youngsters need to help prepare them for the less child-centered, more academically demanding, classrooms of the early elementary grades. In addition, school teachers need to learn more child-centered, activity-oriented approaches to ensure the carryover of preschool program gains.

Kamii, C. & DeVries, R. (1978). Physical knowledge in preschool education: Implications of Piaget's theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Four types of questions are found that help preschoolers distinguish between objects and events: asking the child to make predictions (What will happen if?); asking the child about how to create desired goals or effects (What would you need to make ____ ___?); Asking the child about the actions are connected with events (How could you try to_____?) and asking about causation (Why does X happen when you are doing Q?). Such questions help the child restructure thinking and encourage thoughtful answers.

Lally, J. R., Mangione, P. K. & Honig, A. S. (1988). The Syracuse University Family Development Research Program:

Long range impact of early intervention with low-income children and their families. In D. Powell (Ed.), Parent education as early childhood intervention: Emerging directions in theory, research, and practice. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Fifteen years after attendance from 6 months to 5 years at an omnibus preschool program that had a strong theoretical base in Piagetian theory, language development theory, Alinsky's social action theory, and Eriksonian theory, teenagers showed markedly less delinquency, and less violent forms of juvenile delinquency, compared with control youngsters. Program girls showed significantly less academic absence and better academic achievement than their controls, although males showed no scholastic differences as a function of enriched preschool ten years previous to the research.

Layzer, J. I., Goodson, B. D., & Layzer, J. A. (1990). Evaluation of Project Giant Step. Year Two Report: The study of program effects. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.

This New York City project for poverty preschoolers mandated continuity of programming through kindergarten. Teachers developed continuity plans for the children and families in their own classes as well as engaged in on going in-service activities with the elementary school teachers whose classrooms the preschoolers would later attend. Preliminary results suggest significant child gains and more parent satisfaction rather than

adversarial relationships between caregivers, teachers, and parents.

Levenstein, P. (1988). Messages from home: The mother-child home program and the prevention of school disadvantage. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.

Low-income, low-educated mothers of one year olds were home-visited for either one or two years weekly. The Toy Demonstrator brought books and toys as VISM (Verbal Interaction Stimulus Materials) to encourage the mother to converse with the child, with a focus on the books and toys. Replications of the program show that positive success of the program, in terms of later elementary school achievement for the toddlers who had been in program depended on the maternal personality. When mothers had been "Strivers", interested enough in their own successes to go on to get High School equivalency diplomas and jobs, then the program effects were not as marked in comparison with Striver mothers in the control groups. But for the group of mothers labelled "Hesitators", there was a significant increase in successful school achievement if the family had been in program, compared with controls. Thus, preschool enrichment programs may need to select families vulnerable to discouragement, and without early insight into coping skills and the need for education for themselves or their toddlers, in order to ensure that home visitation program effects will be advantageous for the family and financially wiser "investments" for service agencies.

Seefeldt, C. (Ed.). (1990). Continuing issues in early childhood education. Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Researchers examine issues such as when early childhood education should begin, how it should be evaluated, what qualifications early childhood educators need, and what the preschool curriculum should contain.

Smilansky, S. (1968). The effects of sociodramatic play on disadvantaged preschool children. New York: Wiley.

Teachers of 420 low-income, disadvantaged preschool and kindergarten children taught them ways to engage in sociodramatic play in the classroom over 67 hours during nine weeks. When teachers intervened to stimulate sociodramatic play, preschoolers became more flexible planners, sustained play for longer periods, used more expanded and elaborate language, and improved skills in the use of pretend play.

Spodek, B. (Ed.) (1982). Handbook of research in early childhood education. New York: The Free Press.

Experts provide synopses, and integrate knowledge from, researches in early childhood education settings.

Sroufe, L. A. (1983). Infant-caregiver attachment and patterns of adaptation in preschool: The roots of maladaptation and competence. In M. Perlmutter (Ed.), Minnesota symposium in child psychology (Vol. 16, pp. 41-81). Hillsdale, NJ:Erlbaum.

Preschoolers in interactions with teachers and peers showed more disturbances socially, if in infancy they had been insecurely attached (either avoidant or anxious/ambivalent) to mother. The avoidant babies turned out to bully more as preschoolers. Preschoolers who had been securely attached to mother in infancy were able to play most positively with peers, and solve social problems without rejection or angry quarrels with peers. Teachers who work with preschoolers who have not had a secure relationship in the first years will need to be particularly careful about maintaining positive interactions, offering caring and encouragement and support despite rebuffs, rejections, and difficult behaviors that they may encounter with the children.

Tizard, B. & Hughes, M. (1984). Young children learning. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Young children have many more turn-taking conversational bouts at home compared with the preschool environments. Because they have many children in class, preschool teachers often try to redirect and refocus a child to an acceptable activity. However, for young children to get to know about and understand the

puzzlements of their world, they need to be able to persist in longer conversations with caring adults who can enlighten them and appreciate their attempts to make sense of events and phenomena. Language environments need to be perceptive, responsive, and in-depth in order for learning to occur. In other research of Tizard, a teacher solely responsible for a group of youngsters had children with increased expressive and receptive language scores on the Reynell scales. Too often, when two adults were responsible for a group of children, the adults tended to talk with each other instead of responding to the children.

Wittmer, D. S. & Honig, A. S. (1988). Teacher re-creation of negative interactions with toddlers. In A. S. Honig (Ed.), Optimizing early child care and education (Special Issue). Early Child Development and Care, 33, 77-88.

Male toddlers, although as likely to be compliant to preschool caregivers as females, received more negative bids in response to their non-compliance (compared to females). Teachers may need to sensitize their responses to male preschoolers, who are likely to have a higher activity level and more neediness at the younger ages. Otherwise, teachers may inadvertently re-create the same patterns of aversive interactions that sometimes characterize the home environment of some toddlers.

Wittmer, D. S. & Honig, A. S. (1989, April). Convergent or divergent: Teachers' questions to three-year-old children in day care. Paper presented at the biennial meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development, Kansas City, Missouri.

Preschool teachers rarely use Socratic, open ended questions. Earlier research with toddler teachers showed the same phenomenon. Convergent questions that just require a yes/no answer or one single correct answer were overwhelmingly used (80%) by caregivers. Yet children's memory and recall and integrative abilities are stretched by the use of open-ended questions. Such questions, for example would be "What can you tell me about X ?" "What did you enjoy the most?" "How do you think we could get the baby to stop crying?" "What might happen if you tried that?" Sigel's "Distancing Hypothesis" suggests that young children have to think about and organize ideas and memories in order to answer an adult's Socratic questions. Cognitive ability and skills come into play and are practiced. His research found that when young children could answer questions about objects or events referred to in words they were advanced in their thinking skills compared with youngsters who could only respond if they saw a two dimensional picture of the event. The children doing the poorest cognitively were those who could only answer questions with respect to concrete life-sized objects, rather than a representation of the object (toy, picture, word).

Footnotes

[1]Invited presentation for the "Spotlight Series" of the Central New York Study Council, Syracuse University College of Education.